

The Media and the Far Right in Western Europe

Playing the Nationalist Card

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Introduction

On March 8, 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy created a political uproar during the French presidential campaign when in a televised interview he proposed creating a “ministry for immigration and national identity.” His political rivals immediately denounced his plans as an attack against the French republican tradition and accused him of flirting with the xenophobic ideas of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front. Shortly afterward, though, the Socialist candidate, Ségolène Royal, asked her supporters to “reconquer the symbols of the nation” instead of “abandoning the national anthem to the extreme right.” She said that if elected she would “ensure that the French know the words to *La Marseillaise*, and that every family owns a national flag” to “fly from their window on national holidays.”¹ So intense was the row over French identity that it sidelined the more traditional materialist concerns that tend to define Left-Right competition. As the *New York Times* put it at the time, “the battle over French identity has overtaken discussion of more practical issues like reducing unemployment and making France more competitive.”²

Although partisan appeals to national identity are not always as explicit as in the French elections, they are a much broader phenomenon in Western Europe. In September 2007, for example, British

¹ Agence France-Presse, “French flag sparks tug-of-war in election race,” *Agence France-Presse*, March 25, 2007.

² Elaine Sciolino, “Identity, staple of the Right, moves to the center of French campaign,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2007, p. 1.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown stirred controversy when he stated at the Labour Party's annual convention that he wanted to create "British jobs for British workers." The Conservative opposition accused Brown of stealing the phrase from a pamphlet of the extreme Right British National Party and of disregarding European Union (EU) law. A month later, international media spotlights turned to the Swiss legislative elections, where the Swiss People's Party relied on a controversial campaign against immigration to win a record 29% of the Swiss vote. A People's Party campaign poster showed white sheep kicking a black sheep out of Switzerland, alluding to the party's proposal to deport aliens who commit criminal offences. Even in Germany, where historical alarms go off whenever politicians make appeals to German identity, the Christian Democrats resorted in December 2007 to anti-immigrant rhetoric. Ahead of state elections in Hesse, the state premier, Ronald Koch, turned an incident of youth violence into a discussion about foreigners in Germany, explicitly associating certain ethnic groups with crime. "We have spent too long showing a strange sociological understanding for groups that consciously commit violence as ethnic minorities," he stated in an interview in the popular tabloid *Bild*.³

Partisan appeals to national identity are not a recent phenomenon. Since the 1980s, mainstream parties have incorporated national identity themes into their programs, creating a new axis of political competition. As this book shows, issues such as immigration, citizenship, asylum, and historical memory have become a constant source of partisan rivalry. This rivalry is often missed by conventional accounts of party politics, which tend to focus on traditional materialist themes. Although these themes continue to dominate partisan competition, in the past few decades, they have been supplemented by a set of non-materialist issues that cut across traditional party cleavages. Public apprehension over globalization has helped push these issues into the political mainstream by giving parties incentives to "ethnicize" politics in search of new electoral niches. The political turn toward national identity has taken different forms in different countries and in different times but has caused similar political rifts between those who defend or oppose certain conceptions of the national collective.

³ Nikolaus Blome, "Wer in Deutschland lebt, hat die Faust unten zu lassen!" *Bild*, December 28, 2007.

It has also set in motion similar political processes and brought about comparable political effects. This book sets out to explicate these processes and to analyze their effects. It will show that the way political parties have competed over national identity explains why some West European countries have experienced a surge in electoral support for the Far Right, while other countries have not.

Party positioning in the competitive space is an important determinant of political outcomes, but its analytical utility is limited by the varying capacity parties have to communicate their messages to voters. Often missed by standard accounts of party competition, this variation is particularly strong between established and newer parties and, hence, most relevant to the discussion of Far Right parties, which sometimes lack the organizational and financial resources necessary to make their positions known. During their earlier phase of development, smaller parties need the media to publicize their views to national publics. The media can help small parties communicate their messages to much broader audiences than their organizational or financial resources would otherwise allow. Moreover, they can confer legitimacy and authority to political newcomers, and they can dispel voter doubts about their electoral viability. In this sense, the media control the gateway to the electoral market.

Politicians are acutely aware of this gate-keeping role of the media and are often critical of those helping give the Far Right publicity. In April 2007, for example, the leader of the Swedish Social Democrats, Mona Sahlin, was criticized for participating in a televised debate with the leader of the Far Right Sweden Democrats. She was accused of helping the party get much more exposure than its poor electoral standing would have justified or its finances would have allowed. Media treatment of Far Right parties has also come under fire in Greece. In June 2007, the leader of the Greek Communist Party, Aleca Papariga, accused the Socialists of “directing” certain media to grant the Far Right Greek Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) prime-time exposure to hurt the Conservatives. She complained that the leadership of LAOS frequently participated in major television shows and that its exposure far exceeded its limited electoral strength.⁴ Her arguments echoed

⁴ «Ενίσχυση ΛΑΟΣ από ΠΑΣΟΚ καταγγέλλει η κ. Παπαρήγα», *Καθημερινή*, 6 Ιουνίου 2007 (“Papariga reports strengthening of LAOS from PASOK,” *Kathimerini*, June 6, 2007); Γιώργος Χρ. Παπαχρήστος, «Καραμπόλα για τον ΛΑΟΣ» *Τα Νέα*,

those of many French observers, who criticized Socialist president François Mitterrand for facilitating the rise of Le Pen in the mid-1980s by instructing public broadcasters to grant him exposure. This book seeks to subject these arguments into systematic comparative analysis. It will show that we cannot fully explain the divergent electoral fortunes of Far Right parties in Western Europe without examining the degree of communication resources they have at their disposal.

The focus on party and media behavior marks a departure from the voluminous literature that seeks to explain the divergent electoral trajectories of the West European Far Right parties. It similarly asks why Far Right parties have been successful in some but not other political settings, yet its answers differ. This book emphasizes political – instead of sociological, institutional, and economic – variables, and it focuses on explaining variation in Far Right performance across time rather than across countries. Using this temporal approach and a wide array of evidence, it traces party competition and media behavior in the past few decades. This book argues that the way mainstream parties have dealt with national identity issues has structured the political opportunities available to the Far Right and that the treatment of Far Right parties by the mass media has affected their capacity to make electoral advances.

Why the Far Right

Two decades after Klaus von Beyme complained that “there is virtually no comparative literature on the topic” (1988: 14), Far Right parties have earned more scholarly attention than any other party family in Western Europe. The empirical record justifies this burgeoning scholarly interest: in the past sixty years, no other party family has managed to make such significant electoral advances across so many countries in such a short time. As [Figure 1.1](#) shows, since the mid-1980s, Far Right support has quadrupled in Western Europe. In sixteen West European countries, parties that are thought to belong to the Far Right polled

6 Ιουνίου 2007 (George Chr. Papachristos, “Row over LAOS,” *Ta Nea*, June 6, 2007); Γιώργος Χρ. Παπαχρήστος, «Πάγκαλος μαινόμενος κατά ΚΚΕ» *Ta Nea*, 7 Ιουνίου 2007 (George Chr. Papachristos, “Pangalos angry with KKE,” *Ta Nea*, June 7, 2007).

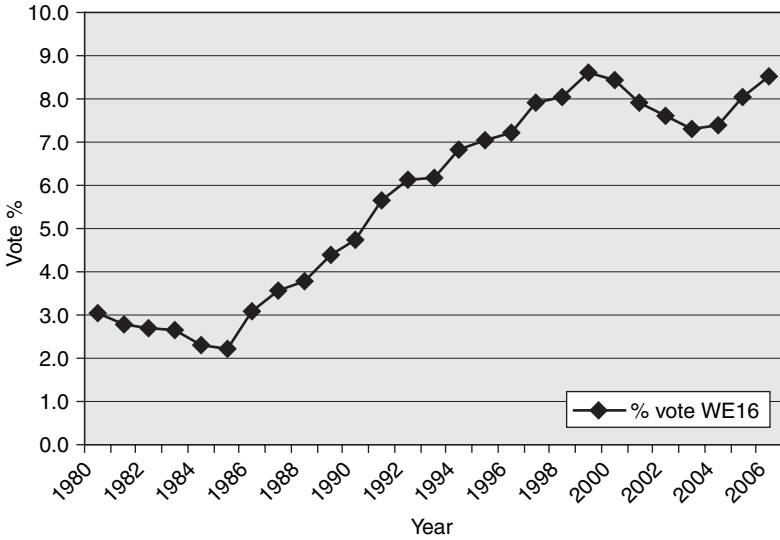


FIGURE 1.1. Far Right support in Western Europe, 1980–2006
Mean vote for all parties included in scholarly literature as being on the Far Right, which ran in national legislative elections in sixteen West European countries (Norway, Switzerland, and EU15 except Luxembourg) between 1980 and 2006.
Sources: Mackie and Rose 1997; Caramani 2000; www.electionworld.org.

8.5% of the national vote in 2006 compared to 2.2% in 1985. They have consolidated a sizable presence in Austrian, Belgian, Danish, French, Italian, Norwegian, and Swiss politics. Yet, although this phenomenon is transnational, it is far from pan-European. In countries such as Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, the Far Right has failed to become a permanent force in national politics.

Apart from the geographical spread of the phenomenon, there are also good normative reasons to justify the exponential growth of the scholarly literature on the Far Right. Far Right advances have evoked memories of interwar democratic disintegration, and they have reshaped the contours of legitimate political discourse, injecting it with xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism. Even where Far Right parties have been least successful, as in Germany, they have had an important influence on policy outcomes, especially on issues such as immigration and crime. Many observers consider the rise of

the Far Right as one of the greatest threats that democratic pluralism has confronted since the interwar years. Before democratic societies can successfully combat the intolerance and exclusivity that is usually associated with right-wing extremism, there must be an effort to understand why the Far Right has become such a potent political force in contemporary politics. That hundreds of books, articles, and dissertations have found it so hard to come up with definitive answers for the sources of Far Right support is suggestive of the complexity of the phenomenon and the need to devise new conceptual tools to understand it.

New Building Blocks

This book engages directly with the burgeoning literature on the Far Right, extending its findings in a number of ways. The first is by focusing on how parties compete over national identity issues. This study joins ranks with those works emphasizing the sociocultural effects of globalization and postindustrialism, linking socioeconomic development with changes in value priorities. There is already a significant body of literature making this link (e.g., Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). But in its emphasis on postmaterialist values, this literature tends to downplay the flip side of postmaterialism – what Piero Ignazi has called the “silent counter-revolution” (1992). Sometimes viewed as neoconservative backlash against postmaterialism, this revolution is thought to bring about heightened concerns about socio-cultural values and issues, such as “nationalism, law and order, ethnocentricity and bourgeois morality” (Minkenberg 1992: 58). Such concerns create demands for self-affirmation, self-defense, and self-assurance (Ignazi 2003) that encourage individuals to seek refuge in collective forms of identification.

The most common of such forms is national identity. By eroding the link between the citizens and states, globalization creates an identity crisis that reinforces the need for national identification and creates demands for cultural protectionism. This book shows that mainstream parties sought to profit from these demands by playing the nationalist card – by radicalizing political competition over national identity issues. The radicalization of such issues sets in place a new axis of political contestation – the “national identity axis” – delineating

partisan differences over perceptions of the national collective. Immigration has been at the epicenter of partisan arguments over national identity. But it is not the only issue contested on this axis. In the past twenty years, citizenship laws and asylum regulations have also led to highly charged debates in Western European parliaments. Recent decades have additionally witnessed the politicization of historical memory and the eruption of bitter partisan disputes over the way European societies remember their pasts (Art 2006). One contribution of this book is that it brings together primary and secondary evidence to carefully trace partisan competition over these issues and to assess its effects on electoral outcomes. It shows that party positioning on national identity issues has structured the political opportunities available for Far Right breakthroughs.

The second contribution of this book is the examination of how the media affect the electoral fortunes of Far Right parties. Scholarly analyses often acknowledge the role of the media in the rise of this phenomenon (e.g., Kitschelt with McGann 1995: 130; Norris 2005: 270; Mudde 2007: 248–253), but so far comparative analyses of media effects remain rare (e.g., Mazzoleni et al. 2003). For the most part, the literature assumes a perfect electoral market, in which parties can easily communicate their messages to voters. Although this assumption is valid for major parties, which have easy access to state and institutional resources (Katz and Mair 1995), it does not hold for most Far Right parties. Because of their smaller size, such parties tend to lack the organizational capacity to recruit and to mobilize potential voters and the funds to publicize their messages to national publics. The media, then, can make up for their organizational deficiencies and financial shortages by helping them become known. Moreover, media exposure can bestow prestige and legitimacy to controversial appeals and give the impression that political newcomers have a mass following. Far from being neutral bystanders, media outlets determine the capacity of new actors to take their message to a wide audience with minimum organizational effort (Tarrow 1998: 126–129). Simply put, the media is a political resource that can lift marginal parties from obscurity and push them into the political mainstream.

One of the main findings of this book is that the Far Right is more likely to thrive in those political contexts in which the media is willing to grant it exposure. Using evidence from the analysis of media

content as well as from interviews with journalists, this book finds substantial variation in the way the media has treated the Far Right across time and across countries. In some settings, the media helped the Far Right to capitalize on the political opportunities available in the electoral market and to achieve electoral breakthroughs, whereas in others it blocked its entry into the mainstream political discourse. By systematically examining the association between political parties and the mass media, this book is suggestive of the role the latter can play in bringing about electoral change.

The third contribution of this book is the explication of a temporal approach to party development. Instead of focusing on variation in Far Right voting across countries, this book traces Far Right trajectories across time. It breaks party development into distinct phases and shows that some factors best explain the earlier trajectories of Far Right parties whereas others explain the later ones. The basic idea is that once parties pass a “threshold of relevance,” their fortunes are shaped by different factors than before. Using this idea, this book examines the trajectory of Far Right parties before and after their initial electoral breakthrough and reassesses existing accounts of Far Right performance. It shows that mainstream party competition is more important during earlier phases of party development than in later phases. Mainstream parties have the biggest shares of the electoral market, and the way they position themselves in the competitive space structures the opportunities available for political newcomers. Tracing this positioning across time, this book identifies a particular pattern of competition that changes the structure of opportunities available to new contestants. The temporal analysis of party competition documents the programmatic oscillation (Ignazi 2003) of mainstream parties on national identity issues. The argument that runs through this book is that mainstream parties played but then retracted the nationalist card, creating opportunities for Far Right breakthroughs.

Moreover, the stage-based view of party development reassesses the emphasis often placed on party-specific characteristics. This book acknowledges the importance of party organization, leadership, and appeals but points out that prior to electoral breakthroughs these characteristics are of limited explanatory utility. Specific party attributes are more important after Far Right parties achieve electoral

breakthroughs, for sustaining and extending their initial electoral gains. Badly organized, poorly led, and narrowly focused parties are likely to become flash phenomena. Such parties are likely to be co-opted by major parties and to quickly disappear from the electoral map. On the contrary, parties that manage to establish solid organizational structures, avoid leadership struggles, and extend their programmatic appeals are likely to resist subsequent efforts by their mainstream competitors to co-opt them. Using this temporal approach, this book suggests why some Far Right parties survive their first breakthrough whereas others do not. And why mainstream parties are sometimes able to regain the political space lost to the Far Right whereas in other times they are not.

“Ethnocrats” on the March

First, a few definitions and some context are necessary. What do Far Right parties have in common? And how do they differ from their predecessors? This section offers a definition of the Far Right, and the next one sketches its postwar electoral trajectory, identifying three distinct “growth waves.”

The inclusion of parties such as the French National Front, the Austrian Freedom Party, or the Belgian Vlaams Blok in the same party family presumes they share basic characteristics that set them apart from other families. But no two scholars have so far been able to agree on what these characteristics are. In fact, the identification of a common set of features has proven so troubling that it became the subject of scholarly inquiry itself (Mudde 1996). This book adopts a minimal definition (Gerring 2001: 78) applicable to all Far Right parties across Western Europe. Whereas some have described the Far Right as antisystemic (Ignazi 2003), antidemocratic (Carter 2005), antiestablishment (Givens 2005), and populist (Betz 1994; Mudde 2007), there is an emergent realization that the most distinctive characteristic of the Far Right is nationalism (Eatwell 2000: 412; Hainsworth 2000; Mudde 2000; Givens 2005). In part, this growing scholarly consensus reflects a gradual ideological convergence of the parties themselves toward the ethnopluralist principles of the new right (Nouvelle Droite) and their programmatic shift to questions of national and cultural identity (Betz 2002). The concept of the “nation”

is at the heart of this ideological turn and “certainly functions as a ‘coathanger’ for most other ideological features” (Mudde 2007: 16). According to two prominent students of the Far Right, its worldview is based on “a myth of homogeneous nation, a romantic and populist ultra-nationalism which is detected against the concept of liberal and pluralistic democracy and its underlying principle of individualism and universalism” (Minkenberg and Schain 2003: 162–163; cited in Ignazi 2006: 227). The scholarly consensus on the ideological essence of the Far Right is consistent with interviews with Far Right politicians in Austria, Germany, and Greece. Although they differed on other issues, they all shared an ethnocentric conception of politics. Adjusted to the particularities of each country, this conception approximates one of the most common definitions of nationalism – that it is the political principle calling for the congruence of the political with the national unit (Gellner 1983: 9).

Indeed, no other party family equates in such an explicit manner the state with the nation, citizenship with ethnicity, and the *demos* with the *ethnos*. This emphasis on a nationalist conception of politics – or “ethnocracy” – is what sets the Far Right apart from other parties. The introduction of the Hellenic Front’s manifesto – a small Greek extremist party that boasted ties with the Le Pen’s National Front – is not atypical of Far Rightist ideas: “The ideology of the Hellenic Front is Greek nationalism. Greek nationalism is inseparably linked with freedom of the Greeks and with the struggle for the national integration of Hellenism.”⁵ Echoing these ideas, the party’s former leader and current LAOS MP, Makis Vorides, claims that “there are objective criteria for who belongs to the Greek nation. We speak the same language; we have lived through the same experiences and wars; we believe in the same God.”⁶ Despite their strong attachment to nationalism, all Far Right parties claim to be loyal defenders of democratic principles. But in their democracy, there is barely any place for non-nationals. In the manifesto of the Sweden Democrats, a small

⁵ Hellenic Front, <http://www.metopo.gr/idea.htm> (last accessed: April 30, 2004; site no longer available); see also Ελληνικό Μέτωπο (1994) *Πολιτικό Πρόγραμμα: Αποφάσεις του Ιδρυτικού Συνεδρίου, Αθήνα 9–10 Απριλίου 1994*, Αθήνα: Ελληνικό Μέτωπο [Hellenic Front (1994) *Political Program: Decisions of Founding Congress, Athens 9–10 April 1994*, Athens: Hellenic Front].

⁶ Interview #11, February 2004, Athens.

Far Rightist group that was allegedly funded by Le Pen, the tension between ethnocracy and democracy is apparent: “We are nationalist democrats and dissociate ourselves from all forms of totalitarianism and racism.”⁷ Nationalist rhetoric is not always as explicit in party platforms, but the political principle is similar across the Far Right spectrum. For example, Pia Kjærsgaard, the leader of the Danish People’s Party, avoids overt references to nationalism, stating that “the essence of the party program is a warm and strong love of our country.”⁸ But her party’s program allows no delusions as to what the “love of country” translates into: “Denmark is not an immigrant-country and has never been so. Therefore, we will not accept a transformation to a multiethnic society. Denmark belongs to the Danes and its citizens must be able to live in a secure community founded on the rule of law, developing *only* along the lines of Danish culture.”⁹

The insistence on cultural homogeneity and cultural protectionism explains why nearly all Far Right parties oppose immigration. Calls for “Austria first!” or “France for the French” and demands for the expulsion of illegal immigrants are at the heart of this ethnocratic view of politics. It is through this view – adjusted to fit the historical particularities of each country – that Far Right parties filter their programmatic appeals. Hence, their forceful insistence on law and order is usually accompanied by suggestions for border police to block illegal immigration and for tougher asylum laws to end the flow of asylum seekers. Likewise, their complaints about crime tactfully associate criminality with immigration and foreigners. Similarly, their social policies are painted with strong nationalist hues. Income redistribution and welfare protection are limited to “those who belong to the ethnically defined community and to those who have contributed to it” (Kitschelt with McGann 1995: 22). The “little man” whom they seek to protect can be anyone but a foreigner.

This nationalist worldview also constitutes the basis for some of the most radical claims of the contemporary Far Right. The Vlaams Blok, which was dissolved by a court order in 2004 (and renamed

⁷ Sweden Democrats: http://www.sverigedemokraterna.net/int_text.php?action=full_news&id=225 (last accessed October 2007).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Dansk Folkeparti, http://www.danskfolkeparti.dk/sw/forend/show.asp?parent=3293&menu_parent=&layout=0; emphasis added (last accessed October 2007).

Vlaams Belang), wants to unify all Dutch territory in one country and calls Belgium a historical mistake (Swyngedouw 1998). Similarly, Jörg Haider, whose electoral breakthrough in 1999 compelled the EU to impose sanctions on Austria, considers the country a “historical miscarriage.” The German Republikaner refers to the five new German states as “Central Germany” and asks for the completion of German unification with the Eastern territories (Minkenbergh 1997: 82). The German National Democratic Party (NPD) puts forth a biological explanation of national differences in its program, and LAOS calls for resistance to the foreign powers that want to impose foreign traditions on the Greek race.¹⁰ The glue that ties these parties together is their shared understanding that the political should be congruent with the national. Interestingly, nationalism is also the definitional attribute that contemporary Far Rightists share with their interwar counterparts. As Juan Linz observes, “if there is one characteristic of fascism on which all analysts agree it is the central place of nationalism in its ideology, particularly the type of nationalism that goes as far as placing loyalty to the nation ahead of loyalty to the state” (1980: 161).

Sketching the Electoral Contours of the Far Right

Even if one looks beyond fascism, Far Right breakthroughs are not a contemporary phenomenon. Although scholarly interest in the Far Right focuses on its more recent trajectory, there were two more growth waves in Far Right support. The first wave occurred across a handful of postwar elections. It was most evident in Austria, where disenfranchised Nazis, unemployed civil servants, embittered war veterans, and dispossessed refugees took electoral shelter in the newly founded progenitor of the Freedom Party, the Federation of Independents, giving it almost 11.7% of the 1949 vote (Riedlsperger 1978). In Germany, gloomy forecasts of Far Right advances did not materialize, as only a tiny fraction of the millions of expellees, repatriates, and de-Nazified officials (Stöss 1988: 34) lent their support to

¹⁰ LAOS (2001). *LAOS: For a Greece that belongs to the Greeks*, Athens: LAOS (in Greek).

the three Far Right parties that ran in the first two elections.¹¹ The French Far Right, led by Marshal Pétain's defense lawyer, managed to elect four deputies in the 1951 elections who subsequently joined other political groups (Ignazi 2003: 88). The political heritage of the pre-war, fascist regime might also explain the extraordinary performance of the Far Right in the first postwar Greek elections. Although the fragmented extreme Right received only 3.4% of the vote in 1946, the electoral combination of former fascist officials and anti-Communist guerrilla fighters got 11% of the 1950 vote (Nicolacopoulos 2001: 43, 69–70, 107, and 112–113), the best result the Greek Far Right ever achieved in the past sixty years. Overall, the collapse of the interwar regimes left behind a significant group of people that remained attached to the old regime, refusing to accept the new status quo. But their resentment toward the new order faded away along with the circumstances that had created it in the first place. The growing democratic consensus and the extraordinary economic growth deflated much of the initial support for the Far Right. Subsequent spurts in Far Right support occurred under much different circumstances, hardly comparable to the conditions of human suffering and abrupt change under which the postwar Far Right thrived.

Although the first wave of Far Right growth occurred somewhat contemporaneously across countries that had undergone rapid regime change, the second growth wave spread across three decades of rapid economic development and relative political stability. Second-wave Far Rightists were a much more diverse group than their predecessors, but their breakthroughs proved just as short lived. The Poujadist Movement that received almost 12% of the French vote in 1956 is the most representative example of this second wave. Although it was originally founded as an antitax initiative for the defense of shopkeepers and artisans (as its name suggested), in the midst of the Algerian crisis the movement became host to a number of right-wing

¹¹ The three parties that made up the first wave of right wing extremism – the German Rightist Party, the German Empire Party, and the German Community – received less than 2% of the vote in the first national elections. Some scholars also categorize the German Party (DP) and the German Fellowship/Bloc of Expellees and Victims of Injustice (DG/BHE) as Far Right. Both received higher percentages in the early postwar elections before they were absorbed by the CDU and the FDP (Stöss 1991: 106–136, Kitschelt with McGann 1995: 207–208).

extremists, including Le Pen. The Poujadists foreshadowed the appearance of similar groupings in the Netherlands (1960s), Denmark, and Norway (1970s), where new, neoliberal, populist movements scored significant results in national elections at the expense of established parties. During this second phase, the German and the Italian political systems also experienced significant strains but of a different nature. Instead of antitax movements, both countries witnessed the surge in support of nationalist extremists associated with interwar authoritarianism. In Germany, the NPD received an alarming 4.3% in the 1969 elections, barely missing the 5% threshold for national legislative representation, and in Italy, the neofascist Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI) got 8.7% in 1972, its best result since 1946. Yet support for both parties quickly waned, along with scholarly interest in the subject. In fact, except for the 1972 MSI spurt, the 1970s were the Far Right's most "quiet" decade.

The current wave of Far Right growth differs from both previous ones. Recent Far Right advances have occurred almost simultaneously across Western Europe, and many of them have proven to be much more enduring than earlier breakthroughs (Betz 1994: 23). Since the mid-1980s, the Far Right has consolidated its presence across a number of West European countries.

Having defined the Far Right and sketched its postwar trajectory, we are now ready to return to the original puzzle: what explains the divergent electoral fortunes of the contemporary Far Right?

Far Right Parties Across Time

Scholarly efforts to account for the electoral fortunes of the radical right abound, and their findings vary depending on the relative weight given to voter and party behavior. Some works emphasize the effects of sociological (e.g., Ignazi 1992; Betz 1994; Kitschelt with McGann 1995), economic (e.g., Jackman and Volpert 1996; Knigge 1998; Lubbers et al. 2002), and institutional (e.g., Carter 2002; Golder 2003; Givens 2005; Norris 2005) variables on voter preferences; others focus on how the strategic positioning of parties in the competitive space affects their performance (e.g., Kitschelt with McGann 1995; Abedi 2002; Lubbers et al. 2002; Ignazi 2003; Carter 2005; Meguid 2005; Norris 2005; van der Brug et al. 2005); and a few concentrate

on the internal characteristics affecting the behavior of radical right parties, especially their organization and leadership (e.g., Taggart 1996; Betz 1998a: 9; Immerfall 1998: 254; Eatwell 2002, 2005; Carter 2005; Mudde 2007; Art 2008).

While varying on the relative emphasis they place on these factors, scholarly exegeses of Far Right trajectories have been motivated by a single question: “Why have Far Right parties thrived in some countries but not in others?” This has pushed the search for answers along a common path: the examination of Far Right performance in national parliamentary elections across Western Europe. But this focus on spatial variation has diverted attention from the temporal dimension of the Far Right puzzle. One of the main suggestions of this book is that to fully understand the recent advances of the Far Right in Western Europe we must pay closer attention to the performance of these parties across time, not just across space. This requires the development of conceptual tools to analyze the electoral trajectory of the Far Right; developing these tools is the main topic of discussion in the remainder of this chapter. [Chapter 2](#) uses these tools to develop a novel theoretical framework for understanding Far Right breakthroughs.

Attentiveness to the temporal dimension of Far Right development necessitates the breakdown of the electoral trajectory of Far Right parties into different phases (Ellinas 2007). As will be shown here, this deceptively simple analytical step allows the reexamination of conventional explanations for Far Right performance. It is plausible that the weight of each explanation varies depending on the stage of Far Right development. Some factors are likely to be more important during earlier stages in party life spans, while others might better explain subsequent phases. The task, then, is to identify the different phases and to draw clear lines of demarcation between them. Previous work shows that this is not an easy task (Harmel and Svåsand 1993: 71), in part because of the unavailability of clear criteria for distinguishing between the various phases. This book proposes a distinction between two phases, an early and a later phase, and the use of Giovanni Sartori’s “threshold of relevance” (Sartori 1976: 121–129; see also Pedersen 1982) to differentiate between them. The basic idea is that once parties become electorally relevant, their electoral fortunes are determined by different factors than before.

The emphasis on parties' electoral relevance directs attention to one of the most intriguing moments in party life spans, that of their initial electoral breakthrough. This is the moment when a party's national electoral strength increases significantly to a point where it changes the parameters of political competition. This increase is most noticeable in national elections, when a small party's strength increases by a few percentiles or when a party passes the national electoral threshold and gains substantial legislative representation. But Far Right parties have also made headlines through breakthroughs in European or in local elections. Regardless of how an initial breakthrough is achieved, it marks a substantial increase in party strength that crowns minor players with the perception of national political relevance. This breakthrough is arguably the most important point in the trajectory of Far Right parties. Subsequent spurts in support are also significant, but they largely depend on the capacity of the party to use the initial breakthrough to strengthen its organization, improve its finances, and broaden its appeal. Initial breakthroughs lift small parties from relative obscurity and turn them from backstage understudies into important political actors.

This stage-based view of party development has important implications for the existing approaches to the study of the Far Right. The most serious implications concern the analysis of party competition: the breakdown of party life spans permits the assessment of the relative importance of mainstream and marginal parties across time. Current work assigns equal weight to both, measuring mainstream and Far Right positions in the competitive space. Based on the foregoing analysis, however, it is only reasonable to do so, only after Far Right parties pass the threshold of relevance. Before the Far Right becomes big enough to matter, it is more appropriate to focus primarily on the strategic choices of mainstream parties (e.g., on their programmatic convergence). In other words, the appeals of Far Right parties might be more important after their initial breakthrough (Schain et al. 2002: 6), while those of mainstream parties might be more significant beforehand.

The differentiation among various phases of party development has consequences not only for the relative importance ascribed to political agents but also for the analysis of their tactical choices. Once Far Right parties pass the threshold of relevance, they change

the competitive environment and, consequently, the range of options available to mainstream parties. Before the Far Right becomes electorally relevant, mainstream parties might afford to ignore or co-opt their claims. But once confronted with a sizable opponent, the option of ignoring or dismissing (Budge and Farlie 1983; Meguid 2005) Far Right claims might no longer be available to mainstream parties. The improved political standing of the Far Right might compel its mainstream competitors to address these claims. The growth of Far Right parties also affects their own strategies. To gain electoral prominence, small parties initially target niche electorates and focus on signature issues that differentiate them from their mainstream competitors (Norris 2005: chapter 9). During their earlier stage of development, the smaller parties rely on the mobilization of narrower constituencies situated away from the median voter. But as parties grow, they can be expected to tactically moderate their appeals in order to attract more heterogeneous electorates. The analysis of partisan politics across time allows the consideration of changes in party positioning in the competitive space.

Party competition aside, the breakdown of party development into different phases can also facilitate the re-examination of organizational effects. Arguments about the impact of intraparty structures on Far Right performance usually do not distinguish between various stages in party life spans. But it is reasonable to expect the impact of organization to vary from the first phase to the second. Good organization can help a party sustain or extend its gains after its first breakthrough, but it might be irrelevant before. The empirical record is full of examples of disorganized parties that proved successful: Pim Fortuyn's List in the Netherlands, Pauline Hanson's One Nation in Australia, New Democracy in Sweden, Political Spring in Greece, and the Progress Party in Denmark. All are examples of newly founded parties that lacked a solid organizational basis when they achieved their initial electoral breakthroughs. But lacking stable organizational structures, some of these parties witnessed sharp drops in their electoral support, while others collapsed. In this sense, disorganized parties might be good candidates for flash phenomena – they are likely to disappear from the electoral map as quickly as they appear.

The emphasis on different phases of party development can also elucidate the impact of the media on Far Right performance. Have the

critical cover stories of the Austrian weekly magazines *Profil* and *News* damaged or boosted the electoral appeal of Haider? Did Le Pen end up benefiting from bad publicity in the French media? If so, why did the treatment he received from the press in the late 1990s (Birenbaum and Villa 2003: 45–70) not undermine the National Front's electoral fortunes? The breakdown of party life spans into phases might help provide answers to these questions. It is plausible that the media have a stronger impact on the electoral performance of Far Right parties during the earlier phase of their development than afterward. Media exposure can push minor parties into the mainstream debate, give them visibility, and legitimate their claims. Yet, once minor parties become part of the mainstream discourse, media effects might subside in importance. Efforts to analyze the role of the media in Far Right performance might be more fruitful if they concentrate on the period prior to the parties' first breakthrough (see Chapter 2).

A stage-based view of party development might also help explain the difficulty mainstream parties have confronted in formulating effective policy responses to the Far Right. In line with the temporal logic explicated here, it is reasonable to expect that once Far Right parties pass the threshold of relevance, they are harder to combat. Electoral breakthroughs endow new parties with additional resources. Those parties that use these newly gained resources efficiently are likely to improve their organization, widen their membership base, and broaden their appeal. This makes it harder for mainstream parties to reclaim the constituencies lost to the Far Right. The enhanced strength of Far Right parties after their breakthroughs can perhaps explain why the adoption of tougher immigration policies by their mainstream competitors often fails to suppress electoral support for these parties and why strategies of *cordon sanitaire* have not achieved the desired results (Downs 2002; van der Brug and Spanje 2004). As Far Right parties grow, their electoral fortunes are less dependent on the tactical maneuvering of their mainstream competitors. They become increasingly more reliant on their own organization and appeals.

Overall, the breakdown of party development into distinct phases allows the re-examination of the conventional wisdom about the determinants of Far Right performance. This bears significant consequences for the analysis of party competition. First, it draws attention

to the most intriguing moment in Far Right trajectories, their first breakthrough. Second, it suggests that the relative weight assigned to Far Right appeals and organization must vary across time, depending on their respective political clout. These factors are likely to be more important after the Far Right passes the threshold of relevance and less important before. Finally, it means that in the earlier phases of party development, before Far Right parties become big enough to matter, the emphasis must be on the actors that shape the structure of political opportunities available for the Far Right and on the factors allowing these parties to capitalize on these opportunities.

Plan of This Book

Chapter 2 uses this stage-based approach to develop a novel theoretical framework to account for Far Right trajectories. The analytical focus is on two explanatory variables: how mainstream parties compete over national identity issues and how the media treat the Far Right. The basic argument can be condensed into a few sentences: In the past few decades, globalization brought about a sociocultural change in Western Europe, increasing the salience of national identity issues. The change in value orientations created demands for cultural protectionism and encouraged mainstream parties to play the nationalist card – to radicalize political competition along national identity lines. The programmatic shift of mainstream parties alienated certain segments of their heterogeneous constituencies or key international allies, compelling them to moderate their initial positions. This created political opportunities for the rise of Far Right parties. Where the media were willing to give excessive exposure to the political newcomers, the programmatic retreat of mainstream parties allowed Far Rightists to enter the mainstream debate, gain public visibility, and legitimize their claims. Wherever major parties retracted the nationalist card and mainstream media gave them publicity, Far Right parties achieved electoral breakthroughs.

While the analytical emphasis of the theory is on the earlier phase of party development, the propositions explicated here also have ramifications for the subsequent development of the Far Right. Using this framework, this book explores why in some cases the Far Right was able to sustain and extend its initial electoral gains, while in others it

quickly collapsed. In all the cases examined here, the advances of the Far Right triggered attempts by the mainstream right to co-opt their agenda by adopting tougher positions on national identity issues. Such attempts were only effective in some cases. The study attributes the varying effectiveness of mainstream party co-optation strategies to factors that are largely endogenous to the Far Right, such as the degree of its organization and the breadth of its appeals.

This book tests the utility of this analytical framework by applying it in the “most similar” cases of Austria (Chapter 3) and Germany (Chapter 4) and the “most different” case of Greece (Chapter 5). It then probes its generalizability by examining the case of France (Chapter 6) before concluding with a discussion of the findings and an explication of possible venues for future research (Chapter 7). This book relies on evidence from interviews with mainstream politicians and top journalists, on the examination of archived legislative and party records, and on the analysis of newspaper and television content from the past two decades. Unlike most studies on the Far Right, this book also uses evidence from interviews and meetings with Far Right leaders and from the observation of Far Right rallies and party functions.